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COVID-19 and Xenophobia: Reckoning with East Asian Identities in the United States
Allie Highsmith
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Please note that this paper discusses anti-Asian hate at length and contains explicit descriptions of attacks.
“F***ing Asians, go back to China!’: Man wanted for punching elderly woman, throwing Chinese food at her husband in NYC”

“Asian American woman sues elderly neighbor for racial harassment, indecent exposure to her and her son”

“Couple violently attacks Indigenous Filipina nurse distributing face masks in New York subway”

“SF man charged with 31 hate crimes over vandalism, burglary of 20 Chinese-owned businesses”

“Asian American woman attacked, robbed, dragged, and bitten whilst on a run in San Francisco”

Introduction and Context

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans in the United States have experienced a dramatic spike in hate incidents ranging from verbal harassment to physical assault. Stop AAPI Hate, a nonprofit organization started during the pandemic, documented 3795 incidents between March 19, 2020, and February 28, 2021. As of this writing, they have reported 9081 incidents across the country since the pandemic began in the US in March 2020 (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). Some of these incidents include nationally reported shootings like those at Atlanta spas in March 2021, and others, much more commonplace, are largely ignored by media outlets. Given the increased awareness of racial violence and the increased frequency of racialized violence against Asian Americans, how has what it means to be Asian American changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began? What are strategies used by Asian Americans in order to navigate the hate crime context of the pandemic?

Asian Americans of different ethnicities have reported facing increased discrimination or attacks; however, hateful sentiment has largely been directed towards Chinese Americans, as many Americans had been led to believe that the COVID-19 pandemic is the fault of China through phrases popularized by former President Trump and his base like “China virus” and “kung flu.” Even though verbalized anger was actually directed at Chinese people, the homogenization that many Asian Americans report facing has meant that others are attacked too. Stop AAPI Hate reported that, in the first year of the pandemic in the US, 42.2% of those who reported incidents were Chinese, followed by other ethnicities such as Korean, Vietnamese, and Filipino (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). Among those respondents, 68% of hate incidents were reported by women and 47% were reported by those between the ages of 18 and 36, with 34% coming from respondents between 36 and 60, and only 7% older than 60. Therefore, even within the Asian community, the anti-Asian violence was experienced disproportionately by women and younger Americans.¹

While anti-Asian hate and sentiment has been a key element of the pandemic, this and two other facets together made up how participants experienced the pandemic and reacted accordingly: the surge of anti-Asian hate and sentiment principally, an abundance of time, and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that gripped the US in the summer of 2020.

As a result of these increased anti-Asian hate crimes and sentiment, participants reported having changed their practices and even lifestyles. Many were also forced to reconsider the role of faith in their lives. Finally, participants, many for the first time, examined the Model Minority Myth, and their attachments to their identities.

Literature Review

Scholarship on xenophobia, toward both Asians and other religious, ethnic, and racial groups, has been key to understanding why these surges in xenophobic violence and nativist rhetoric happen and how they relate to the current context. Erika Lee’s *America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States* on the one hand affirms the well-recognized cyclical nature of xenophobia, showing how “high immigration combined with an economic downturn fuels xenophobia” (4). But more importantly, however, she argues that “xenophobia has been a constant and defining feature of American life. It is deeply embedded in our society, economy, and politics. It thrives best in certain contexts, such as periods

¹ Co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate, Cynthia Choi, explained also that the 3795 incidents initially reported in Stop AAPI Hate’s first national report is probably an undercount, as many Asian Americans don’t want to report these incidents because of things like mistrust of law enforcement or disbelief that reporting will help (KQED 2021).

of rapid economic and demographic change, but it has also been actively promoted by special interests in the pursuit of political power... Xenophobia has been neither an aberration nor a contradiction to the United States' history of immigration" (7). Lee's other book, *The Making of Asian America*, is a comprehensive history of Asians in the US wherein many of the same events covered in *America for Americans* appear. Lee shows how the US has been influenced heavily by Asian America and Asian immigration. She explains motivating factors for leaving one's home country, including war, natural disasters, unrest, economic instability, much of which can be tied back to US presence in those countries (2015: 4). She also notes how there are many forms of racism today like color-blind racism, cultural racism, and microaggressions (2015: 6), diverging from scientific racism and segregation.

Lee explains the histories of different ethnic groups in the US, and shows how anti-Asian violence has been prevalent essentially since Asians have been in the US, with the Chinese Expulsion from Tacoma in the 1800's, Japanese internment during World War II, the 1992 LA riots, undocumented Chinese immigration wherein countless died. While Asian Americans have continued to be targets of violence, other more subtle methods of discrimination have also gained steam.

In addition to these scholarly materials, I interacted with some popular materials as well, like the LA Times' podcast "Asian Enough" and New York Times articles, which gave more personal and contemporary takes on Asian hate and discrimination. In addition to these, Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* examines different ways that she has come into her identity as a Korean American, and many participants' experiences resonated with hers. This book provided a lot of the background about how the Model Minority Myth plays out in practice.

Methods

In order to gather information on my research question, I conducted semi-formal interviews with 29 participants. All interviews were allotted one hour and 72% of participants did two interviews, ideally spaced one to two weeks apart. The only criteria were that participants were Asian American and over 18 years old. All interviews were conducted in English. I used a snowball sample, beginning with Asian American friends and asking them for references to other potential interviewees. One family in particular, the Lee's, were extremely helpful in finding potential participants. First, I spoke with their youngest daughter, Lauren, who gave me the names of her parents, Julie and Josh. Altogether, Lauren, Julie, and Josh's contacts (including themselves) accounted for eight participants, or 28% of the sample. Of the 29 participants, I knew or had a friendly relationship with eight of them prior to interviews. Not included in that eight are people who were friends of a friend that I didn't really know well even if we had chatted occasionally.

The sample of 29 participants was made up of 17 women, 10 men, and two gender non-binary people. There were 15 Chinese Americans, six Japanese Americans, five Korean Americans, two Vietnamese Americans, one Indian American, and one Thai/Cambodian American². During the pandemic, participants lived primarily in eight states³: 12 in California, eight in Washington, three in Colorado, two in Illinois (both in Chicago), and one each in Texas, New York, Alaska, and Arizona. In terms of generational status, 12 participants were second generation Americans or further removed, eight were first generation Americans, five were adopted (two from China, two from Korea, and one from Vietnam), and four were immigrants themselves. Finally, by age, 20 participants were in their 20's, two were in their 30's, four were in their 50's, and three were in their 60's.

My sample was skewed toward women, younger adults, and people on the West Coast. However, these demographics resonate with Stop AAPI Hate reports that significantly more women reported hate incidents than other genders, and more young people reported than older people. Additionally, historically, Washington and California have been states where there is the most xenophobia directed

² One participant, Maya, is counted in both the Chinese and Japanese categories.

³ Some participants moved around during the pandemic, especially students, but I count each person in the state in which they spent the most time during the pandemic.

towards Asian Americans since that's where many immigrated initially, and today hate incidents facing Asian Americans are most common in California, with Washington not far behind.

With all participants, interviews were conducted over google meet, facetime, or a similar video conferencing platform as a result of both distance and the ongoing pandemic. During the first interviews, questions were largely the same for everyone, but if participants did a second interview, questions were more specific to them as individuals.

Findings

Throughout conducting this research, many participants asserted that they weren't worried about being victim to a hate incident because it doesn't happen where they live or happens only infrequently. Even though many participants live in California or Washington, most of them were not worried about being attacked even though these are states where the rate of attack is relatively high, with roughly half of attacks reported being in California alone. Of all the hate crimes documented by Stop AAPI Hate from March 2020 through February 2021, "1,226 incidents took place in California, and 708 in the Bay Area alone. The majority of incidents in the Bay Area — 292 — took place in San Francisco" (KQED, 2021). Many participants felt safe in California or Washington because of the large Asian communities in their areas. However, co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate, Cynthia Choi, explained that one reason for high rates of incidents in California is because there are "large concentrations of Asian American communities" (KQED, 2021).

Even with the surge of hate crimes concentrated in the Bay Area, many participants living in that area reported minimal fear or concern for their personal safety, although some did report being concerned for a family member who is also Asian, usually elderly. Generally, older people and men tended to report being less vigilant and concerned about being attacked or assaulted, regardless of location, however one participant, 63 year old Chinese American, Sam⁴, from San Francisco⁵, said that although he is more worried than he was pre pandemic, "I'm not overly worried, especially being in the Bay Area, but attacks have happened in the Bay Area" and then "I always worry about the South, you know, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, how they would treat me if I went there, so I tend to avoid going to those three states"⁶ (Sam, Interview, 7/28/21). Although he said he would feel much more concerned in the South and outside of the Bay Area, he also told me about an incident that happened when COVID was first becoming a problem in which he was dropping his car off for service and normally he would take the bus home, but he had a cough and was worried someone would think he had COVID and target him, so he "made other arrangements" (Sam, Interview, 7/28/21).

Other participants were more concerned about the hate crimes in their areas. James, in his 50's from San Francisco, explained that he took a trip to Waco, Texas a few months prior and reported not having felt threatened or awkward at all (James, Interview, 8/3/21). He then said "I felt more at ease in Waco, than I do in San Francisco. It's kind of strange" (James, Interview, 8/3/21). Hannah, a Cambodian and Thai American in her 20's from Tacoma, was especially cognizant of the fact that hate crimes can and do happen close to her. She told me about various hate crimes that had happened in Tacoma or surrounding areas over the past few years. "Before [the COVID-19-related surge of hate crimes against Asian Americans], hate crimes were always a thing against Asian Americans, but now it's just so normalized" (Hannah, Interview, 6/22/21). While the pandemic was a time that many Asian Americans and US Americans generally became more educated about historical violence and discrimination against Asian Americans, participants like Hannah knew it very well before the pandemic happened.

Even though many participants said that they were not personally worried about being attacked or assaulted, they did say they were more aware of their Asianness both in public and in their own conceptions of their identities. Therefore, they explored their previous experiences with their identities

⁴ Participants who have not indicated otherwise have been given a pseudonym to protect their privacy.

⁵ Please see list of interviews for more information about participants and dates of their interview in alphabetical order.

⁶ Quotes from participants have been edited for length and clarity.

which were largely characterized by a feeling of in-betweenness. They talked about methods of avoiding harm, like code switching and presenting differently in public. Many participants were also forced to consider questions of the Model Minority Myth and the effects it has had on anti-Asian hate in the US. Faith was also a very important piece to how many participants dealt with the trauma that Asian hate brought up for them. Finally, participants' conceptions of their identities changed "drastically" from the beginning to the end of the pandemic.

"Being a Chameleon": Acceptance and In-Betweenness

To explain this shift in awareness of identity, it's important to acknowledge how many interviewees understood their Asian identity prior to the pandemic. Most reported numerous tensions related to being Asian, like being caught between person of color (POC) and white spaces, assimilation and integration, authenticity and in-betweenness.

A Japanese and white biracial participant, Hayden, 21, spoke of navigating both Japanese American and white culture. Hayden was prompted to think more about race in the US during the pandemic, and as a result, family became a focal point in her understanding of her identity as Japanese American during COVID-19. Her white father's opinions differed greatly from the rest of her family's, including her Japanese mother's and siblings' opinions. One instance Hayden shared that illustrated this phenomenon was when she explained how in many East Asian cultures, varying by country and region, putting chopsticks upright in a bowl connotes death and suffering. "My dad left them in [upright] and my sister reached over and pulled them out and put them flat... he got so angry and he was so aggravated... and he said 'you're not Japanese you're American'... and that whole instance, hearing that ringing in my ears was just like... I can't believe I have to deal with this." (Hayden, Interview, 6/17/21).

Biracial participants like Hayden were not the only ones who struggled with in-betweenness. Many Asian Americans report having been labelled as "basically white" for much of their lives, but don't fit into white spaces, yet at the same time are excluded from spaces for POC for being "too white." Most participants noted that there were times in their lives where they did not feel Asian enough or American enough. They felt like they weren't a part of the conversation on racism because they were perceived as too white, or they felt like they had to code switch or adapt in other ways in order to try to belong in many different spaces. Chiaki, a 24 year old biracial Japanese American, noted that during the summer of 2020 they got involved with many advocacy groups for POC and felt that they weren't perceived as "of color enough" (Chiaki, Interview, 7/7/21) because of their Asianness.

Molly, a 21-year-old Korean American from the suburbs of Denver, also explained some of the effects of not feeling Asian or Korean enough for much of her life. She explained how growing up, others put stereotypes onto her and she felt like she subconsciously began to alter her personality to conform to those stereotypes. She said "I think people assuming that I would be really really good academically forced me to want to be really really good academically because they have this idea of me like okay, she's Asian, therefore, she's really good at school. And so if I don't fit into that box, am I then not Asian in their eyes? What happens to my identity as an Asian in the eyes of my peers?" (Molly, Interview, 6/24/21).

Adoption was one of the defining circumstances for several of my participants when thinking about the challenge of authenticity. One participant, Alexa, a 24 year old Korean American adoptee, also from a suburb of Denver, said that she had frequently been the only Asian or POC in any given space, and often felt too American for Korean culture. She explained that, when she considered trying to get in contact with her birth mom in Seoul, it was a very difficult journey because "I put it in my brain that I have to be my own sort of ideal of what a Korean person should be and that I would somehow be an embarrassment or a failure... [it was] something that would hold me back, not being able to speak Korean, being embarrassed to go into Korean restaurants because [of] my mispronunciations of everything" (Alexa, Interview, 6/19/21). Alexa, like Molly, had frequently felt not Korean enough because, among other things, she can't speak Korean. As a result, they were both stuck with the shame for much of their lives about not being able to conform to what many US Americans perceive Asians as being.

The issue of assimilation vs. integration also became very important while conducting this research, and tended to be more prevalent for older participants. Historically and in present day, the United States has only valued immigrants for their contributions to capitalism, not for their respective cultures and what they as individuals can bring to the metaphorical melting pot: “[*Time Magazine*] praised Bit Chuen Wu, a twenty-three-year-old from Hong Kong who worked twelve hours a day to support his widowed mother and younger brother without complaint. Wu, who expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be his ‘own boss’ in the United States, was portrayed as the very model of the American work ethic, capitalism, and entrepreneurship” (Lee 2019: 255). Even when they are valued as productive members of society, many have been forced to assimilate, leaving behind their own cultures, rather than integrate. As a result, many immigrants adapted to US American ways in order to survive or get ahead, leaving behind their language, customs, etc. in favor of what they hoped would be success in the United States. Some participants even cited the fact that when they were kids they could speak their parents’ language, Korean, Thai, etc., but as they got into school their parents stopped speaking it with them so that they could get ahead in school and they ended up losing the language altogether. Today, it seems like integration is becoming the more favorable choice. One participant spoke to this trend particularly eloquently. James, a Chinese American from San Francisco in his 50’s, defined those terms as follows: “Integration means you still keep your culture intact even though you can maneuver and negotiate the dominant culture versus assimilation where you’ve completely given up your own culture and I think I kind of straddle that between assimilated and integrated” (James, Interview, 7/19/21). While James emphasized his shift from wanting to assimilate when he was younger to now wanting to hold on to all that is great about Chinese culture, he also noted that there are limits to how much any person can be perceived as American: “no matter how much you think you are American... your phenotype determines how American you can be” (James, Interview, 7/19/21).

Two participants in particular spoke about how their experiences prior to COVID influenced the way that they experienced the broad anti-Asian sentiment during the pandemic. Molly was a participant who noted having experienced comparatively significant amounts of microaggressions. She said that “a lot of things are coming up because of the hate crimes, like a lot of past experiences, a lot of past conversations I’ve had with people that were not okay and that I was mildly uncomfortable with before and now years later are very glaringly obviously not okay” (Molly, Interview, 6/24/21). As a result of being confronted with a lot of anti-Asian sentiment all at once, going from veiled microaggressions to outright explicit racism, Molly was forced to confront trauma that she hadn’t had to deal with for years. Chiaki noted that they had also long experienced microaggressions in the forms of bullying, slurs, and “compliments” referring to Asians being smart or hardworking, but because of what they perceived as privilege as a half white person, they didn’t feel that they had the right to complain about discrimination (Chiaki, Interview, 7/28/21). In other words, as a result of years of minimizing their experiences with racism and discrimination, many participants felt ill-prepared to confront more explicit racism as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many participants experienced that sort of resurfacing of trauma, many of those same participants emerged from the pandemic feeling much closer to their identities and more accepting of themselves.

Sunglasses: Code Switching, Shapeshifting, and Other Methods of Avoiding Harm

Although most participants did not report having felt personally threatened, many still took measures to try to hide their identities to varying degrees as a result of increased anti-Asian sentiment, particularly those in areas with small Asian populations. Overall, women and younger people were much more likely to report having tried to conceal their identity or gone out of their way to try to avoid harm. Measures taken to try to avoid harm ranged from not going out at night, to code switching with language and accents, to physically concealing appearances.

Probably the most extreme example of a participant trying to conceal their Asian appearance was from Molly. She explained “I’m more hyper aware of being Korean in public spaces because I don’t feel safe anymore,” she continued, “When I go fill up gas, I’ll wear sunglasses, I won’t show my eyes, I’ll try to cover my face. After the Atlanta shooting, I felt like I couldn’t go anywhere alone without a white

person with me because I didn't feel safe" (Molly, Interview, 6/9/21). Many women also said that they did not go out at night anymore, like 20 year old Chinese American Lauren, who pre pandemic would "walk to my girlfriend's house which is a couple blocks [from where I live] and I would walk at 10, 11pm if I needed to, but after a lot of the violence started happening, especially after the Atlanta shooting, I stopped doing that. I'd either go earlier or she'd pick me up" (Lauren, Interview, 6/6/21).

In addition to women, younger people in general also frequently code switched or took measures to avoid harm. One participant, 24 year old Korean American Jack, explained that when he went to college in Bozeman, Montana, he felt relatively safe in the city of Bozeman; it was similar to where he grew up in that it was a wealthy white area, so not out of the ordinary for him. However, he recalled times when he was driving in rural areas outside of Bozeman and "I would just wear my sunglasses all the time, just really be as low key as possible. Probably not really in fear of being attacked or called names, I just don't need to draw attention" (Jack, Interview, 6/26/21). He continued: "I feel like everything that's ever happened to me is just a matter of walking away" (Jack, Interview, 6/26/21), and went on to acknowledge that he thought this was an option afforded him as a result of his gender. Chiaki also reported that in the past they had tried to shapeshift so to speak by wearing "whiter" clothes in whiter spaces, like communities oriented around the outdoors, for example- they consider their "white clothes" to be things like "Tevas, and what people would generally consider hippie clothes, like loose baggy pants and bohemian style shirts and jewelry" (Chiaki, Interview, 7/7/21). They were more likely to wear things like Happi coats and kimono style jackets around family or in spaces they felt to be more queer or POC spaces (Chiaki, Interview, 7/7/21). Another Japanese American, 22 year old participant Hideki, living in Washington, reported code switching by using more "proper terminology" around older white people, but when he's with friends, he uses more slang and has a little bit of an accent (Hideki, Interview, 6/27/21).

Outside of code switching and shapeshifting, participants sometimes went to greater, more expensive lengths to hopefully avoid harassment. Nick, a 22 year old Chinese American who lived in New York City for most of the pandemic, by and large did not change his behaviors as a result of increased anti-Asian sentiment. However, he did mention a few times that he "had to get from Manhattan to Brooklyn very early in the morning, pretty much the first train at four in the morning, so I did make a conscious choice to take a Lyft instead even though it was way more expensive than taking a \$3 train. Because I wasn't sure if my Asianness would put me in jeopardy" (Nick, Interview, 6/29/21). In addition to Nick, Sam reported having gone out of his way to try to avoid a potential altercation. Sam was the oldest participant who reported having done this, at 63. Sam told me about when he "made other arrangements" so he wouldn't have to take the bus (Sam, Interview, 7/28/21).

The Model Minority Myth, Stereotypes, and Pandemic Violence

Because the pandemic and subsequent hate crimes invoked many Asian Americans to consider their identities more, they were prompted to consider the effects of the Model Minority Myth (MMM) on their lives, and started to understand the negative effects of what many perceive to be a "positive stereotype." Specifically, the MMM stereotypes Asians as very smart, successful, rich, well-rounded etc. By stereotyping Asians with qualities like these, white supremacy then pits Asians against other minorities by asking, "if Asian Americans could succeed, proponents of the model minority discourse argued, why couldn't others?" (Lee 2019: 258). On another level, the MMM means that Asians are perceived as quiet, reserved, not wanting to make waves. In this way, it is further weaponized against other racial minorities and Asian Americans alike. Additionally, many qualities that are related to the MMM, like being smart etc., are perceived as good qualities, and "good stereotypes," where in reality, no stereotype is good. However the implication that the stereotypes related to the MMM are positive stereotypes makes it that much more difficult and confusing to interrogate. In practice, the MMM is a tool of white supremacy as it still attempts to keep Asians in a place below whites by masking oppression as a good thing, coded as a compliment, leading many people to perceive the MMM and the discrimination that many Asians face as "the best version of discrimination" (Hazel, Interview, 6/10/21), so they don't feel they can complain since they don't think they have it as bad as other minorities, particularly Black people. "We have been cowed by the lie that we have it good. We keep our heads down and work hard,

believing that our diligence will reward us with our dignity, but our diligence will only make us disappear. By not speaking up, we perpetuate the myth that our shame is caused by our repressive culture and the country we fled, whereas America has given us nothing but opportunity. The lie that Asians have it good is so insidious that even now as I write, I'm shadowed by doubt that I didn't have it bad compared to others. But racial trauma is not a competitive sport. The problem is not that my childhood was exceptionally traumatic but that it was in fact rather typical" (Hong 2020: 78).

Another facet of the MMM is the fact that it frequently aligns Asians with whites when it is convenient to do so. Lee explains: "the [Chinese Exclusion Act] also established Chinese immigrants-categorized by their race, class, and gender relations as the ultimate example of the dangerous, degraded alien- as the yardstick by which to measure the desirability (and 'whiteness') of other immigrant groups" (2019: 93). Numerous participants reported having been confronted by others asserting that Asians are "basically white." Lee also points out that, as the boundaries of whiteness expand as the country grows more diverse, it really only benefits whites. It used to be that European Catholics and Germans were excluded from whiteness, whereas now all Europeans are viewed as white, and the boundaries of whiteness are again shifting to include Asians (79), even though participants point out that they only selectively receive those benefits of proximity to whiteness and the MMM.

In addition to becoming more aware of the MMM, many participants noted that the pandemic intensified how they perceived the danger of stereotyping and the MMM. For many participants, as they got older, they were able to learn more about racism and the MMM and realized that past experiences weren't okay. One participant, 22 year old Maya from Washington, discussed a time when, in her freshman year of college, she wrote a paper about how she was breaking Asian stereotypes and the professor told Maya that "'those are all seen as good stereotypes so you should watch out to say that you're breaking through them because that's generally a good thing.' And at the time I didn't think there was a problem with that, it wasn't til a bit later that one of my friends told me that's not okay" (Maya, Interview, 6/16/21).

Many participants noted that the sort of racial reckoning that took place during the pandemic in the US was helpful to them in learning more about their identities and racism in the United States. Alexa and Chiaki in particular explained how the Black Lives Matter movement and Black liberation in general were key for them in unpacking their own identities. "I have been introduced to social justice through the Black Lives Matter movement in a way. And growing up too, because there was never any Asian representation that I saw, the closest thing that I saw to minorities being portrayed on screen was through seeing Black entertainment" (Alexa, Interview, 7/8/21). Chiaki echoed Alexa, saying "for me it's much easier to see patterns of oppression and to care about patterns of oppression when it relates to other people. And because of internalized racism it's hard for me to feel bad for myself or admit I've experienced racism, versus the very apparent images of Black racism and homophobia and transphobia made it easier for me to be able to recognize" (Chiaki, Interview, 7/7/21).

Participants who supported BLM still felt that it had the potential to overshadow other social justice organizations for Asians and other less visible minorities. 33 year old Ailan, a Chinese immigrant, added that even though BLM helped her to educate her kids about racism in the US, "I sometimes feel like Asians in America, we're not even at the same level of respect as Black people from other groups" (Ailan, Interview, 7/26/21).

Julie, a 55 year old from San Francisco, provided useful insights about the MMM as a "positive stereotype" and conditional acceptance. She explained that these so-called "positives" like being hardworking and smart are only perceived as applicable to Asians "until something happens and then we're foreigners again" (Julie, Interview, 7/7/21). Another form of conditional acceptance of Asian Americans based on the degree to which they conform to the MMM was explained eloquently by Alexa. If an Asian American doesn't adequately conform to expectations put on them by the MMM, then "suddenly you aren't Asian enough, you aren't good enough" (Alexa, Interview, 7/8/21).

Although there are no positive stereotypes, it can be confusing to understand why the MMM is bad and ultimately hurts Asians and other racial minorities, and benefits only white people and white supremacy. As one participant, 20 year old Indian American Kiara, said, "that's one of the stereotypes

I've enjoyed, I feel like that's the one thing I had going for me as an Indian is that people thought I was smart... they're not going to think I'm stupid at least" (Kiara, Interview, 8/2/21). However, she followed that up by explaining that these expectations for her to be smart or high achieving have "led to a lot of anxiety" (Kiara, Interview, 8/2/21). Julie reiterated: "I think for a lot of people [the pressure from the MMM] would push a person to strive more, push themselves more, but for me it had the opposite effect. I saw my brother's success, and I just thought, I can't meet that so I'm just not going to [try]... It created all sorts of insecurities for me... [and] fear-based living" (Julie, Interview, 6/22/21). Clearly, one negative aspect of the MMM is that it creates unrealistic expectations for many Asians, and if they don't live up to those expectations, they don't feel Asian enough. Furthermore, the MMM is used to pit Asian Americans against other minorities. By selling the narrative that Asian Americans are more successful, wealthy, etc. than Black Americans in general, Black Americans, in addition to white Americans, are made to feel disdain for Asians, diverting energy from focusing on dismantling white supremacy and dividing groups further. The MMM is a tool of white supremacy not only because it is used to define Asianness conditionally, but also because it oppresses Asians and other minorities in the process.

Faith: Navigating Trying Times

Although most participants did not feel directly threatened by violence, the surge in hate crimes directed at Asian American communities still deeply affected most participants. Faith was a really important aspect to many participants in navigating their experiences throughout the pandemic. Participants who identified as Christian generally fell on one of two sides: either they were brought closer to their faith as a result of the pandemic, or they questioned their faith a lot more.

Of those who felt closer to their faith than they did prior to the pandemic, there was of course still a lot of variation. Josh Lee, of the aforementioned Lee family, really helped me to see faith as important to the conversation around anti-Asian hate. Josh, a 55 year old Chinese American from San Francisco, is best described as genial, warm, and inviting. When we began our first interview, he seemed very nonchalant. Although I was still pretty early in the research process, I was surprised by how jolly he was when the subject of the conversation was quite grim and traumatic, and when I pointed this out and asked him why he was so nonchalant, he was suddenly very introspective and reflective. He explained that he has "this big view on life and humanity and the world and existence... nothing surprises me, like how people treat each other and just the hatred... this is how I understand human existence, human community to be" (Josh, Interview, 6/29/21), framing his conception of faith for me. Josh also explained that the pandemic, a combination of an abundance of time, racial reckoning, and anti-Asian hate, helped to shake him out of complacency in more ways than one: "the circumstances of the day can help kick us out of spiritual complacency and make us more proactive about the environment that we're in" and "I think there's ways I've been complacent, taking for granted that I'm Chinese American and not really thinking about it as much as I could, and so the pandemic... has helped me take... my Chinese identity a little bit more seriously" (Josh, Interview, 7/27/21). Josh bringing up the thread of faith in this way as inextricable from ethnicity really made me see it as an important line of questioning in this research.

Like Josh, Lauren's faith was not only an important tool to her in navigating the hate crime context of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it was also a way that she was able to become closer to her identity as Chinese American. Lauren explained that "I love the verse in the bible that's 'you are beautifully and wonderfully made' and I think for a long time it wasn't my Chinese identity that I thought of when I thought about that, and so I think over time I've allowed myself to embrace that more" (Lauren, Interview, 6/21/21).

In addition to her husband and daughter, Julie explained how she would feel in this situation if she didn't have her faith: "I think if I didn't have a faith, I'd probably be bitter and angry, quietly bitter and angry... but I think having that trust in a higher being... has really given me a lot more sympathy for those that are perpetrators... and seeing them as victims as well" and "I think if I didn't have a faith... I would probably want to escape, probably want to run away, withdraw" (Julie, Interview, 7/7/21). Many participants wondered how they would cope with all the anti-Asian sentiment and hate crimes without their faith. 66 year old Chinese American Ellen from San Francisco, explained how she has tried to not

only cope throughout the pandemic but also become closer to her faith in doing so: “[Jesus] would be attentive to people in their need and in their pain and suffering. And at the same time have a righteous indignation that things are not the way they’re supposed to be... I don’t know for people who are secular-how do people get through if they don’t have a sense that there’s someone who actually holds out hope?” (Ellen, Interview, 8/4/21).

While many participants leaned on their faith because of the trying times of COVID, some revisited it altogether. Maya explained that, while in college, she had been disconnected from her faith, but after graduating in may 2021, her faith “became relevant again because of COVID” (Maya, Interview, 7/18/21).

On the other hand, many became more distanced from their faith during the COVID-19 pandemic. No participants fully abandoned their faith during this time, but two in particular did say that the pandemic damaged their faith in Christianity or something to that effect. 21 year old Korean American Alex explained that he had felt more of a gulf between him and his faith through the pandemic: “In Christianity we’re always taught to love and accept but I sometimes find it hard to do so because there’s so much hatred going on in the world and there’s so many of these unfortunate events... I feel this clash between my secular and religious sides where I can’t love people who are going around shooting other people... so I feel conflicted at times” (Alex, Interview, 7/8/21).

Another participant, 20 year old Chinese American Cora from San Francisco, explained that she’s felt a lot of rejection with regards to her faith as a result of the pandemic: “I guess where I’m at right now with faith is a very big question mark... I would say the pandemic really damaged whatever faith I had in Christianity because... a lot of these hate crimes are done by white people who are of some sort of Christian faith... it’s really hard to see the good in a faith when all these shitty things are happening by people who are quote unquote a part of this faith. Right now it’s a lot of why’s and how can I even support or believe something that is associated with so much hate and racism” (Cora, Interview, 6/16/21).

Overall, it seemed like younger people tended to struggle more with faith throughout the pandemic, where for older people it was more of a pillar of their coping through COVID, both with anti-Asian hate and sentiment as well as with general anxiety about being in a pandemic. While there was no consensus, the majority of self-identified Christians in the sample said that their faith either did not change or became more important to them through the pandemic, as opposed to less.

Shifting Identities

Overwhelmingly, of participants who said that their identities had changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, participants were *more* proud of their identities, more empowered, more curious. There was not a single participant who said that they identified less with being Asian. Even if participants didn’t change how they identify, some, like Hazel, a 21 year old Korean American living in Washington, noted that she used the xenophobia as a tool to feel empowered because “that gives me an opportunity to stand up for myself, my family, and my peers more” (Hazel, Interview, 6/10/21). One particularly interesting case was that of Lily, who was adopted from Vietnam as a baby and she grew up in Australia principally, as well as Egypt and Scotland before moving to the US in high school. As a result, it took her a long time to identify with the “American” piece of “Asian American.” She said she doesn’t identify strongly as “Vietnamese American” because she “doesn’t really feel attached to being Vietnamese American because that is so specific to a place I don’t have any real ties to” (Lily, Interview, 6/7/21). She elaborated, “I’ve never really felt like part of the Asian American community but when [all the hate crimes] were happening I was definitely feeling upset about my community being targeted. I never actually went to a rally or anything but I felt upset enough to feel like I was there with them... I’ve never really felt that before. That definitely made me feel like my identity was even stronger being Asian American” (Lily, Interview, 6/7/21).

Perhaps one of the most dramatic transformations was that of Chiaki. Chiaki is a gender non binary and biracial Japanese American who lived in LA for most of the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, Chiaki had their own sort of reckoning with their identity in that they went from being ashamed to being very proud of their identity. They talked about their identity as specifically a *mixed*

Japanese American, saying “I’ve spent a long time thinking of myself as only half of something and now I see myself as double of something. I have even more experiences that make me richer, rather than taking away from either side of my single identity” (Chiaki, Interview, 7/7/21). In addition to learning more about and becoming more in touch with being biracial and Japanese American, Chiaki also began identifying as genderqueer during the pandemic. When I asked them if perhaps those two journeys to acceptance in different realms of their identity were connected at all, they responded with enthusiasm. “Accepting that I can be both Asian and white and that I am neither Asian nor white but something that exists outside the racial categories- mixed race, multiracial, etc.- really helped me also recognize that I can be both feminine and masculine and neither male nor female but something that exists beyond the gender binary” (Chiaki, Personal Correspondence, 8/5/21). They continued: “The hate I felt from others largely related to racism perpetuated by the pandemic, motivated me to love myself even more because I knew that the internalized hatred I felt was wrong and so I had to love myself in every way both in my race and my gender and sexuality” (Chiaki, Personal Correspondence, 8/5/21).

Emma, a 24 year old Japanese American biracial participant from Phoenix explained how much closer she has grown to her identity as Japanese American as a result of the pandemic. It’s also important to note that many of Emma’s experiences with race have been connected to the fact that she comes off as white or Hispanic most of the time, so people don’t always perceive her as Asian. As a result, she said, she had the privilege of not having to think about her identity much of the time. Until COVID began, she had not had to confront her identity, which was a result of “ignorance and privilege,” and “not really having to be aware that I’m Asian every single day. And I’ve realized that I have a lot of privilege to be able to kind of separate myself from that. So it’s been a lot of learning about my culture or learning to respect it more and learning to embrace it because of the pandemic” (Emma, Interview, 7/29/21). Emma also noted that her cousin, Chiaki, was a helpful influence in being able to be more accepting of her identity: “Honestly, watching the people I know that are Asian especially Chiaki⁷ becoming more accepting of their Asian identity and embracing it more has actually inspired me to embrace it a little bit more because it wasn’t something that I thought about on a daily basis until the pandemic” (Emma, Interview, 7/22/21).

Although many participants reported having come away from the pandemic with a much greater appreciation for their identities, some didn’t. One case that I found particularly interesting was Nick, who explained that he didn’t always feel “like I identify with the Asian American plight of trying to fit in in some category... I’ve never felt like an outcast really in any significant way. So I surely identify with being Asian and I wear that proudly, but do I feel like an Asian American in the traditional way? I don’t think so” (Nick, Interview, 6/29/21).

Concluding Implications

Many participants did not feel that threats of violence towards them were serious, but they still felt the need at times to code switch, and many of them revisited ideas of the MMM, faith, and identity as a result of Asianness becoming more of a topic of national conversation since the surge in anti-Asian hate began. Moving forward, more work should be done to analyze the diverse ways that Asians are racialized relative to other POC in order to more effectively include Asians in anti-racism. Many participants noted that friends’ anti-racist efforts felt disingenuous because they seemed to be checking the anti-racism box with performative actions by saying that they support BLM or posting a black square on their Instagram, when they weren’t aware of historic discrimination against Asians or the current surge of anti-Asian hate, which rendered many participants less visible relative to other POC. Their reflections challenge us to reconsider how our anti-racist efforts and goals may exclude Asians and other, less visible minorites.

⁷ I have replaced Chiaki’s real name in this quote

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Interview List

- Adam, 67, Chinese American, from and living in the Bay Area
 - Interview 1: 7/28/21
- Ailan, 33, Chinese, from China and living in Washington
 - Interview 1: 7/26/21
 - Interview 2: 8/3/21
- Alex, 21, Korean American, from California and living in Washington for most of the pandemic
 - Interview 1: 6/23/21
 - Interview 2: 7/8/21
- Alexa, 24, Korean American, adopted, from and living in Colorado
 - Interview 1: 6/19/21
 - Interview 2: 7/8/21
- Bella, 21, Chinese American, adopted, from and living in Alaska
 - Interview 1: 6/24/21
- Chiaki, 24, Japanese American, biracial, originally from Colorado, now living in California
 - Interview 1: 7/7/21

- Interview 2: 7/28/21
 - Personal correspondence: 8/5/21
- Cora, 20, Chinese American, from and living in the Bay Area
 - Interview 1: 6/16/21
 - Interview 2: 7/27/21
- Ellen, 66, Chinese American, from and living in the Bay Area
 - Interview 1: 8/4/21
- Emma, 24, Japanese American, biracial, from and living in Arizona
 - Interview 1: 7/22/21
 - Interview 2: 7/29/21
- Hannah, 22, Cambodian and Thai American, from and living in Washington
 - Interview 1: 6/22/21
 - Interview 2: 7/8/21
- Hayden, 21, Japanese American, biracial, originally from Colorado, now living in Washington
 - Interview 1: 6/17/21
 - Interview 2: 7/6/21
- Hazel, 21, Korean American, from California and living in Washington for most of the pandemic
 - Interview 1: 6/10/21
 - Interview 2: 7/6/21
- Hideki, 22, Japanese American, from Colorado and living in Washington
 - Interview 1: 6/27/21
- Ivey, 20, Chinese American, adopted, from and living in Chicago
 - Interview 1: 7/22/21
 - Interview 2: 8/6/21
- Jack, 24, Korean American, adopted, from and living in Colorado
 - Interview 1: 6/26/21
 - Interview 2: 7/27/21
- James, 50's, Chinese American, from and living in the Bay Area
 - Interview 1: 7/19/21
 - Interview 2: 8/3/21
- Josh, 55, Chinese American, from and living in the Bay Area
 - Interview 1: 6/29/21
 - Interview 2: 7/27/21
- Julie, 55, Chinese American, from and living in the Bay Area
 - Interview 1: 6/22/21
 - Interview 2: 7/7/21
- Kay, 22, Chinese American, from and living in the Bay Area
 - Interview 1: 6/14/21
 - Interview 2: 6/28/21
- Kiara, 20, Indian American, from Texas and living in Chicago for most of the pandemic
 - Interview 1: 7/18/21
 - Interview 2: 8/2/21
- Lauren, 20, Chinese American, from the Bay Area, living in Washington during most of the pandemic
 - Interview 1: 6/6/21
 - Interview 2: 6/21/21
- Liam, 20, Japanese American, from Colorado, living in California for most of the pandemic
 - Interview 1: 7/28/21
- Lily, 20, Vietnamese American, adopted, living in Texas
 - Interview 1: 6/7/21
 - Interview 2: 6/21/21

- Maya, 22, Chinese and Japanese American, from and living in Washington
 - Interview 1: 6/16/21
 - Interview 2: 7/18/21
- Meizhen, 36, Chinese, from China living in California during the pandemic
 - Interview 1: 7/26/21
- Minh, 57, Vietnamese American, from Vietnam, now living in California
 - Interview 1: 7/22/21
- Molly, 21, Korean American, from and living in Colorado
 - Interview 1: 6/9/21
 - Interview 2: 6/24/21
- Nick, 22, Chinese American, from the Bay Area and living in New York for most of the pandemic
 - Interview 1: 6/29/21
 - Interview 2: 7/19/21
- Sam, 63, Chinese American, from and living in the Bay Area
 - Interview 1: 7/28/21